ABSTRACT This article analyzes the connections between gender, labor, and mobility by tracing the transnational careers of two Australian women who began working at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in the 1930s and 1940s: Peggie Broadhead and Muriel Howlett. Both participated in the production of media content aimed at British diasporic audiences while at the same time negotiating their own Australian national identity and sense of belonging, within an imperial framework. A close study of institutional and private archives reveals that these professional responsibilities and tensions resulted in the formation of a new transnational identity of “Dominions broadcaster.” This article reveals the agency and adaptability of Australian women working in international broadcasting, and argues that through their labor and mobility they inscribed and made real the idea of imperial and Commonwealth networks. KEYWORDS broadcasting, British Commonwealth, labor, mobility, national identity

During the 1930s and 1940s, numerous Australians traveled to London in the hope of gaining employment at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The large cohort of Australians working there in 1942 prompted the Melbourne Argus to declare, “There is an Australian colony in the BBC today.” According to the Argus, most of them were “young men of adventurous spirit—or, at least, fellows with a touch of the wanderlust that takes men far from home.”¹ Less visible in contemporary news stories—but equally important to the running of the BBC—were several Australian women already building careers at the corporation. The BBC’s reliance on the knowledge and experience of personnel from around the British Empire and Commonwealth made it a site of international labor as well as international broadcasting.² This article analyzes connections between gender, labor, and mobility by tracing the transnational careers of two Australian women who began working at the BBC in the 1930s and 1940s, Peggie Broadhead and Muriel Howlett. In response to Tanu Priya Uteng and Tim Cresswell’s call for research that explores how gender and spatial mobility “intersect to create shifting subjectivity,” this article...
broadens historical understandings of the fluidity of imperial, national, and professional identities.\(^3\) It also contributes to scholarship on women’s labor in international broadcasting, particularly the role of Dominions women.

The self-governing Dominions of the British Commonwealth, which included Australia, New Zealand and Canada, as predominantly white settler societies, occupied a privileged position in the imperial hierarchy and shared a common sense of Britishness. Media connections helped bind together the British world, creating and sustaining a sense of belonging. Like other staff, Broadhead and Howlett actively participated in the BBC’s central task of defining, reflecting, and projecting collective identity, particularly the idea of Britishness. At the same time, they negotiated their own sense of belonging and national identity within an imperial framework. By drawing on their Dominions knowledge and experience, and strategically engaging with transnational networks, they also advanced their broadcasting careers. Their contributions to British broadcasting were enriched by their travel and broadcasting experience throughout the British Empire, particularly in Australia and British Malaya. As the BBC’s reporter on the first flying-boat service from England to Australia, Howlett embodied modernity, exemplified by air travel and broadcasting.\(^4\) In subsequent years, as a radio producer in External Services, Howlett supported the BBC’s objective of ensuring that the “main ingredients” of all External Services programs included “an exposition of British policy and thought on current affairs” and “the projection of British life.”\(^5\) At the same time, she asserted that her life experience outside the metropole, and her deep attachment to Australia, allowed her to make a specific contribution to empire broadcasting as a Dominions member of the corporation. Broadhead’s value to empire broadcasting was also augmented by her varied experience at the BBC, the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), and the Malayan Broadcasting Corporation. Like other Australasian personnel at the BBC, Broadhead was often called upon to produce stories about life throughout the Commonwealth, from a British point of view. A close study of institutional and private archives reveals that these professional responsibilities and tensions resulted in the formation of a new transnational identity of “Dominions broadcaster.” This identity was intimately connected to Broadhead and Howlett’s work at the BBC—the production of media content aimed at audiences across the empire and Commonwealth.

Transnational approaches to media history are burgeoning internationally.\(^6\) Research on the Australian media’s international links, however, has mainly focused on the flow of media content and ideas, rather than people.\(^7\) Scholarly explorations of the history of Australian women’s work in the international
media include Patricia Clarke’s research on journalist and broadcaster Janet Mitchell, Diane Kirkby’s work on women journalists in progressive political movements in Australia and the United States, and, most pertinently, Kylie Andrews’s consideration of the careers of postwar ABC producers Joyce Belfrage, Kay Kinane, and Therese Denny, who all benefited from periods of work or training at the BBC.8 Transnational history’s central concern with flows, movements, and circulation is well suited to an examination of gender and labor in broadcasting. The broadcasting industry is not only inherently transnational, its structure and function have helped shape lives that resist national frames.9 Scholarly examinations of the connections between media flows and professional mobility are few. Drawing on the “entangled media histories” approach, Kristin Skoog and Alexander Badenoch applied a “decentered” framework in their consideration of the role of women broadcasters within the history of international feminisms, which highlighted forms of social networking associated with women’s organizations.10 This article also builds on Andrews’s examination of the professional mobility of postwar women at the ABC and Simon Potter’s research on Dominions broadcasters at the BBC to discuss the multiple trajectories taken by Australian women in broadcasting and to analyze the connections between gender, national identity, and program content.11

Analysis of careers and networks that span national borders also requires recognition of the ways these connections are motivated by and are reflected in personal experience.12 As Kate Murphy argues in her book on women in the early BBC, consideration of the life experiences of women workers can enrich our understanding of women’s place within the institution.13 Michele Hilmes asserts that studying individuals who became “cultural translators” as they moved between national settings and media industries “can unlock the way that transnationality, and also transmediality, function at ground level.”14 This will be illustrated in this article by the experiences of Peggie Broadhead, whose career crossed broadcasting mediums as well as national borders. The self-directed mobility of women, particularly in pursuit of new employment or educational opportunities, rather than for migration or short-term tourism, has only recently become the subject of scholarly analysis.15 Adding to this, the movements and motivations of non-elite women have often remained indistinct in the historical record because of the inherent challenges involved in “tracing the steps of the less visible.”16 This article’s focus was delineated by the collection practices of four archives with divergent origins: the Broadhead/Robertson family’s personal archive in the UK; the Australian government’s repository for official records, the National Archives of Australia, which holds the records of the
ABC; the BBC’s Written Archives Centre in Reading, England, which has retained Muriel Howlett’s staff file (but not the files of all women employees); and the National Library of Australia, which acquired Howlett’s personal papers after her death. Just as Howlett’s and Broadhead’s careers stretched across the globe, so do their archives. The existence of these collections, especially the inclusion of private correspondence, has allowed me to bring into focus the voices and experiences of two Dominions women who traversed public broadcasting organizations across the British world in the 1930s and 1940s.

Mobility was of central importance to the modernizing world, accelerated by new communication and transport technologies and by modern ideas of self-advancement. For many Australian women in the first half of the twentieth century, the decision to travel to the metropole was intimately connected with self-development as well as the possibilities of success and financial reward. The BBC’s unrivaled opportunities for training and career progression motivated several Australians working in radio to seek employment in London, particularly those working for the ABC, which enjoyed a close relationship with its antecedent, the BBC. For example, in 1948 Kathleen Young, a secretary in the Youth Education Department at the ABC in Sydney, who at times worked as “programme arranger, script writer and editor, and occasionally as a producer,” traveled to England with a work friend. After a year abroad she requested additional leave from the ABC to attend the BBC’s staff training school, acknowledging “that the A.B.C. has been rather overwhelmed with these requests in the last couple of years.” Although management granted Young three months’ extension to allow her to attend the training school, she decided to resign her ABC position in order to stay on in London indefinitely.

After a period of work or training at the BBC, most women broadcasters returned to Australia, where their international experience often translated to better career prospects. Some women, including the two in this study, had long-term careers at the BBC. Women working in the education and children’s departments of the ABC were particularly mobile between Commonwealth public broadcasters; several benefited from bursaries under the Imperial Relations Trust, established in 1937 from private donations. After World War II the scheme was used to fund travel by public service broadcasting officers from Commonwealth countries with the aim of “strengthen[ing] the bonds of the Commonwealth.” Ida Osbourne, supervisor of the ABC children’s session, attended in 1947, as did Kay Kinane, the federal script editor (education), in 1949. Peggie Broadhead was another ABC employee who, as we will see, was able to exploit personal and institutional connections for professional advancement.
She was working in the School Broadcasts section of the ABC when she took leave in 1939 to travel to London with the intention of enrolling in a BBC training course. “I seem to know practically half the people in the BBC but none of them are very good at string-pulling,” Broadhead wrote to her family upon her arrival.25 Leveraging a personal connection with an influential staff member helped many aspiring broadcasters gain a foothold at the BBC. This tactic was possibly even more important for those coming from overseas and for women, who usually could not rely on the old boy network that, Kate Murphy argues, was “a key element of inequality in recruitment” at the BBC.26 Kinane’s Imperial Relations Trust–sponsored visit, for example, was facilitated by Mary Somerville, the BBC’s head of Schools Broadcasting, who had been impressed with Kinane during her 1947 visit to the ABC to assess educational broadcasting in Australia.27 Although Broadhead initially claimed not to know anyone at the corporation who could assist her, she too benefited from Somerville’s generosity. In February 1940 she told her family that Somerville had “wangled me into the Schools Department at a very decent salary.”28 Broadhead was put in charge of science broadcasts and given a secretary—a position of responsibility she would not have achieved had she stayed at the ABC.

Broadhead and Howlett joined the BBC at a time when the employment of broadcasters from around the British Empire and Commonwealth was becoming common practice. During the 1930s, Potter notes, staff mobility between the Dominions and Britain facilitated understanding of the nature of the empire, and the listening tastes and preferences of the BBC’s vast potential audience.29 From 1932, with the launching of its shortwave Empire Service, the BBC began recruiting broadcasters from around the British Empire and Commonwealth in order to ensure the appeal of its programs to the target audience.30 This became standard policy during World War II, leading to what Simon Potter has aptly called “the colonisation of the BBC” and the creation of a dynamic cultural contact zone, albeit one that privileged the “white dominions” of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa.31 On her arrival in London in 1947, ABC broadcaster Ida Osbourne discovered “a real colony of ABC folk.”32 During World War II, the Pacific Service alone employed at least four Australian women as talks producers: Theaden Hancock, Noni Wright, Evelyn Davy, and Ann Shead. The nationalities of numerous other women named in the BBC staff lists are yet to be determined. Empire Service programs were initially produced by mainly male staff, and were shaped to appeal to its imaginary listeners, defined as single, male members of the British diaspora.33 War necessitated the opening
of more positions to women, including in the previously all-male Engineering Division, considerably shifting the gender balance of the BBC.

**Muriel Howlett**

The ascent of Muriel Howlett at the BBC illustrates just how progressive a workplace it was for women in the interwar period. As Kate Murphy argues, this was due to the BBC’s “newness, its pioneering spirit and its modernity,” combined with increasing educational and employment opportunities for middle-class women after World War I. It also provided opportunities for women from outside Britain to advance their broadcasting careers in new directions. In Australian commercial and public service broadcasting in the 1930s and 1940s, professional women broadcasters were largely confined to women’s and children’s programs as well as to secretarial and other support roles. This did not mean that Australian women broadcasters were prevented from engaging in broader national and international issues beyond “the domestic,” but that this engagement still mainly occurred under the umbrella of women’s programs. At the BBC, however, women were able to carve out areas of expertise and attain senior salaried positions in talks, features, science, and other areas, partly due to the BBC’s employment practices, which enabled more equality.

Unlike most other women who rose to senior positions at the BBC in the 1930s and 1940s, Howlett’s family circumstances were modest and she was not university educated. Although Australians were aware of their difference, which was exacerbated by accent, to some extent they were able to sit outside the social class distinctions that remained important at the BBC until at least the 1960s. After six years as a secretary and stenographer at the Shell Company in Sydney, Howlett resigned in 1935, aged twenty-eight, for a reason that was typical for Australian women seeking educational and career advancement: to visit the Continent. She joined the BBC that same year, initially as a temporary stenographer in the General Office. Writing in thanks for an offer of further temporary employment in the News Department, Howlett revealed her need to prove herself as a colonial in Britain: “As an Australian I feel very happy to be here and, if I am permitted a burst of loyalty, as an Australian I want to justify myself in an English office.”

In 1938 she was working as a newsroom secretary (although she had “been putting speakers on the air for months”) when she was selected as the BBC representative on the first direct mail and passenger service from Southampton to Sydney, despite having almost no broadcast experience (fig. 1). A passenger
service between Britain and Australia had operated since 1935, but the journey previously had taken twelve days, via a train part of the way across Europe and five different aircraft operated by three airlines. Howlett’s journey on the Cordelia was to be the first under the new Empire Air Mail Scheme, an endeavor jointly operated by Australia and Britain that had the potential to transform aviation in the British Empire by using a single aircraft along the whole route, and reducing the flying time to seven days. The service offered the prospect of strengthening empire unity by extending modern air transport and improved communications to British outposts.

In the eyes of BBC management, Howlett’s gender and her “Australianness” made for an “even better story than sending one of her men colleagues from the News Talk section.” Far from being an impediment, her superiors believed that her lack of flying experience would only increase the “details and vividness” of her descriptions. Howlett broadcast several commentaries during the journey, destined for English-speaking listeners around the British world. Although women were not usually welcome in this “gentlemen’s club in the clouds,”
as Peter Ewer terms it, there were two female passengers on the journey, and one other female media representative, Marjorie Shuler from the Christian Science Monitor.46 Howlett herself represented the stylish, independent modern woman traveler, despite the fact that she was traveling from the metropole to the periphery—the reverse of her journey three years earlier. The British and Australian press showed enormous interest in the inaugural flight and in Howlett’s role, and profiles remarked on Howlett’s background, work, and previous travel experience.47 Other articles overlooked Howlett’s professional role and achievements to focus on more trivial, gendered matters faced by the modern female traveler. Since she would be “flying from summer to winter in nine days,” insisted London’s Daily Herald, Howlett “finds her main problem a question of clothes.”48

Most passengers in the early years of long-haul flights were elite white businessmen; Howlett’s travel journal, then, is a rare first-person account.49 In its opening pages Howlett remarked on the aircraft’s ability to conquer distance—a marker of modernity.50 Her first recorded emotions were of liberation, and wonder at the miracle of air travel: “Said farewell into microphone. Took off on tick of 5.45. Glorious feeling. Sun through clouds. Houses like dolls houses, roads like string. No feeling at all going up! Heavenly sight.”51 Her preoccupation with the bodily sensations associated with flight—of rising and falling, and of what Chandra Bhimull calls “aboveness”—was typical of early air travelers.52

The Cordelia’s route—from Southampton to Sydney via Athens, Basra (Iraq), Karachi, Calcutta, Bangkok, Singapore, and Darwin (Australia)—emphasized the hegemony of imperial networks. Howlett recorded her impressions at various ports of call, often from the vantage point of a luxury hotel, which emphasized her privileged position and her racial difference from the colonized peoples, who were either invisible in her account or glimpsed only fleetingly, and usually from a distance. In Bangkok, for example, she bought souvenirs and was driven around the city for sightseeing, then “Stayed at Oriental Hotel. Saw hibiscus, frangipani, ate mangosteens and danced at night.”53 Absent from this description are the nonwhite drivers, hotel service workers, and souvenir sellers. In her photograph album of the journey, a picture of the Shatt Al Arab Hotel, Basra (which catered especially to air travelers) is captioned “An oasis of civilization.”54 In Indonesia, Howlett noted: “Ashore during refueling. Only time to see docks of Tandjong Perok where native labourers busy gambling or sleeping.”55 These observations show how she positioned herself as a superior white woman in imperial hierarchies of race and power, and demonstrate the cultural privilege attached to travel.56
In Calcutta, despite being “half dead” from lack of sleep and facing technical conditions that were described by J. C. S. Macgregor, director of the Empire Service, as “not kind,” Howlett’s talk was broadcast on All-India Radio. In Singapore, the fifth stop, Howlett broadcast from the British Malaya Broadcasting Corporation’s station ZHL, which had only just begun transmitting via shortwave. Relaying a talk from Singapore to Britain was costly and technically complex, and the system had been used only on one previous occasion, for the opening of the Singapore Naval Base. Howlett’s BBC broadcast was regarded as so important that when it looked like the Cordelia might not land in time for it, a message was sent to the pilot asking him to speed up. Howlett arrived at the studio via “probably the most hair-raising drive of her life,” just in time to make short voice tests before commencing her broadcast. In Sydney Howlett met with staff at the ABC, where she made an impression on George Ivan Smith, then a young talks editor, who later recalled “listening to a girl from the BBC who was Australian who had just flown out.” Having “grown up in isolation,” this pivotal moment was Smith’s first exposure to the BBC’s role as a fulcrum of empire. The following year Smith was seconded to the BBC, where he became director of the Pacific Service section of the BBC Overseas Service. Smith subsequently played a crucial role in the recruitment of men and women broadcasters from around the British Empire and Commonwealth.

In a broadcast after landing in Sydney, Howlett described her joy at returning to her Australian family. Employing Australian slang, she characterized her journey of thirteen thousand miles as “bonzer” (splendid). Her talk was sent via beam wireless (shortwave, low-power transmission) to Britain, where it was recorded and used on the ten o’clock news in the Home Service. She told her British listeners that to Australians, “distance means little or nothing.” Howlett appears to be consciously enacting Australianness, possibly because her nationality was one reason for her selection for the Cordelia mission. Newspaper profiles also emphasized those traits seen as quintessentially Australian—love of travel, enjoyment of sport and other outdoor pursuits, and national pride. Howlett “is a typical young and healthy Australian,” said one article, “and even in her flat in London she does not allow either herself or anyone else to forget the country of her birth, for she has called it Koala Flat, Kangaroo House.”

In her research on four Australian women who worked at the ABC, Kylie Andrews argues that overseas travel allowed them to “recalibrate their identities.” In England, white female Australians were given the chance to “bolster their own claims to insiderness in the Empire,” writes Angela Woollacott, yet
they were sometimes regarded as “colonials,” meaning inferior or vulgar members of the empire. Women responded differently to the slippages between their identities and were sometimes forced to confront their “colonialness” that had previously been hidden by their “simultaneous but unreflecting identifications” as both Australian and British. Some nurtured their Australian cultural and national identity, while others wished to shed it entirely. Several historians have considered the formation, performance, and transformation of Australian and British national identity in global settings. Richard White argues that Australian national identity is “self-consciously and actively imagined” through travel, and that performance of national identity often involves “playing up to the expectations of outsiders, particularly the English outsider.” Despite Howlett’s Australian national identity being performed for the benefit of a British audience, however, it was no less keenly felt, and she continued to express a profound connection to her homeland, as we shall see.

The journey was a transformative experience that elevated Howlett’s status from newsroom secretary to expert on modern air travel. Once she had fulfilled her BBC commitments in Australia she wrote an article for the Australian Women’s Weekly, a prominent, large-circulation national women’s magazine. In it Howlett satisfied the public’s curiosity about the practicalities of going airborne, “how all the humdrum details of ordinary living go on at 10,000 feet up and 150 miles an hour,” although she acknowledged that she “found nothing humdrum; everything was tinged with a rosy glow.” Rather than focusing on her status as a first-time air traveler, the story cast her as an expert: she advises future passengers on meals, luggage, clothing, and how to pass their time in the air. She is identified as neither Australian nor British; instead, she is the embodiment of a transnational citizen of the modern British world.

Back at the BBC, Howlett resumed her job as a clerk secretary, but the following year was promoted to subeditor in News Talks. She was sometimes called upon to speak on-air in the Overseas Service, particularly when her Australian background proved advantageous. For example, in July 1940 she interviewed an Australian nurse with the Australian Imperial Force in England, and in October 1941 she gave advice to Australians on sending parcels to prisoners of war. She also suggested Australian news stories for the Pacific edition of Radio Newsreel (fig. 2). By 1945 Howlett had ten years of experience in news in both the Home and Overseas Services in a range of roles, including secretary, observer, sequence writer and producer, news subeditor, talks assistant, and editorial assistant. That year she applied for a position as Australian representative
FIGURE 2. Muriel Howlett, talks assistant on Radio Newsreel in the BBC Empire News Talks department, November 1941. BBC copyright content, reproduced courtesy the British Broadcasting Corporation. All rights reserved.
of the BBC, based in Sydney. Even though applications were invited only from “men of British nationality,” Howlett insisted that her experience as a resident of both Britain and Australia warranted serious consideration. In a letter to editor of overseas news talks Peter Pooley, Howlett expressed her deep attachment to Australia as well as her professional identity as a “Dominion member” of the BBC:

As you know, I am anxious for various reasons to return home when I can—partly because I am normally and naturally homesick, partly because (as an only child) I must return to discuss business and family matters with my now ageing parents, but also because I want badly to re-discover my own country. It is ten and a half years since I left Sydney—disregarding the rushed fortnight I had there in 1938—and I have felt increasingly lately that I need to bring myself up to date with Australia in order to be a really useful, well-informed Dominion member of the Corporation.73

As expressed here, Howlett’s Australian national identity was *interdependent* with her imperial (British) identity.74 She believed that her bond with Australia made her a more effective empire broadcaster, and as such, should be sustained. It was an attitude fortified by BBC policy, which specified that the “main function of Empire broadcasting was to project what was happening in Great Britain and also to help different parts of the Empire to understand each other’s problems and way of life.”75 Staff in the Empire Talks Department were encouraged to think of themselves as primarily in the service of empire, but also to draw upon their intimate knowledge of their country of birth. Staff engaged in arranging talks for Empire Talks were directed to regard themselves as “in the first place, a member of the Empire Talks Department,” and “secondarily, as having been co-opted to work . . . on those talks intended for the part of the world of which he has local and specialized knowledge.”76 Howlett’s dual loyalty was not without conflict, however. She told Pooley “that these have been ten extremely happy and interesting years and that if I did go home, I should go with great pleasure and intense regret.”77 Howlett’s insistence on referring to Australia as “home” runs counter to the prevailing belief in a shared British heritage that had Britain at its heart.78 It also reveals Howlett’s internal conflict over whether her primary loyalty lay with her natal home or her adopted one.

Following this unsuccessful application, Howlett worked in External Services as a talks and news producer and occasional reporter, and she became the organizer of the radio newsmagazine *Radio Newsreel* in 1947. By 1955 she
PEGGIE BROADHEAD

Peggie Broadhead started at the ABC in 1937, aged twenty-four, initially as an assistant in Talks and School Broadcasts, where her university arts degree was an asset. She later took over the School Broadcasts section, acting directly under the controller of Talks and School Broadcasts, although her personnel file notes that she worked in this position only “until a male officer was appointed to the staff,” when she reverted to programming and secretarial work.

In March 1939 Broadhead took a nine-month leave of absence to travel to the UK, carrying a letter from the ABC’s general manager, Charles Moses, recommending her for temporary work at the BBC. The BBC’s Empire Service director, J. C. S. Macgregor, was impressed, and commented to Moses that “as she has done more responsible work, it would be a pity to tie her down to a typewriter and a short-hand notebook.” Macgregor suggested that Broadhead attend the BBC training school and “spend some time with producers and others in our Talks and Schools Departments. I think the general picture of British Broadcasting which she will get from the first part of the training course should be of value to her, and she herself seems to like the idea.” This exchange suggests...
that the BBC was more willing than the ABC to give capable women challenging
work beyond secretarial and typing positions.

When the training course was cancelled due to the war, both Macgregor
(who was now liaison officer for the BBC in the Ministry of Information)
and the BBC’s former director of Talks, Hilda Matheson (now director of
the government-funded Joint Broadcasting Committee), offered to find
Broadhead work.86 She eventually spent about six months working in the
BBC’s Schools Broadcasting department as a program deviser, where she assisted
with special home-listening broadcasts for child evacuees. Here, her colleagues
insisted in drawing attention to her Australianness, and took delight in using
words such as “dinkum” (genuine) “too right” (agreed!), and “bonzer.”87 Her
BBC colleagues were “all very disappointed that my accent isn’t very Australian,”
she told her family, but sounding too Australian, conversely, could also provoke
disdain. Listening to Australian journalist and broadcaster Colin Wills speaking
about outback newspapers on a BBC schools program, Broadhead thought him
“jolly good—although my secretary said ‘Why get a man with a voice like that’
in tones of scorn.”88 Anxiety over Australians’ on-air voices was common in the
1930s and 1940s, with women subjected to more frequent criticism over the
suitability of their voices for broadcast. Catherine Fisher notes that most profes-
sional broadcasters used a cultivated or “received” Australian accent, the type
that most closely resembled the British received pronunciation typically used by
BBC announcers.89 In his history of the ABC, Ken Inglis writes that Australian
listeners in the 1930s preferred male voices, with “English or Anglo-Australian”
accents.90 Australians who sounded British were more likely to find success at
the BBC. One example is Mary Hill, who began working at the BBC in 1945,
and whose audible Britishness is evidenced by her selection as one of the BBC’s
television commentators for Queen Elizabeth’s coronation in 1953.91

In her letters home Broadhead remarked often on the BBC’s superior
budgets, staffing, and resources in comparison with the ABC: “It will be amus-
ing working in the A.B.C. after living in state here—with typists rushing to do
all the dirty work—and one’s own private secretary.”92 Mary Somerville, the
head of Schools Broadcasting, viewed Broadhead as a conduit—a means to dis-
seminate superior British ideas about educational broadcasting in Australia.
 Broadhead told her family, “Miss Somerville, the grand old woman of S.B.
is very keen on the idea of the dominions learning from the BBC and thinks
I am heaven sent.” There is no suggestion that either Somerville or Macgregor
considered drawing on Broadhead’s prior broadcasting experience in Australia.
As Potter notes, the corporation was far more interested in educating visitors
about its policies and programming than in learning from the experiences of Dominions broadcasters.\textsuperscript{93} Ironically, Somerville was so impressed by the ABC children’s program \textit{Kindergarten of the Air} during her 1947 trip to Australia that she later adapted it for the BBC as \textit{Listen with Mother}—but that was a rare example of content flowing from the periphery to the center.\textsuperscript{94}

Experience working at an overseas public broadcaster, in any capacity it seems, usually resulted in improved career prospects back at the ABC.\textsuperscript{95} Broadhead returned to Australia in September 1940, via North America, including ten days in New York attending National Broadcasting Company (NBC) rehearsals of educational sessions. The ABC’s federal controller of talks, B. H. Molesworth, who had also spent time at the BBC, told the ABC’s general manager, “Whatever the particular work may be on which she has been engaged for the BBC her services will certainly be of much greater value to us now than before she went away.”\textsuperscript{96} Broadhead’s knowledge of the most up-to-date ideas about education broadcasting, in the center of empire, imbued her with rare power. The desire to be the beneficiary of Broadhead’s expertise led to a bidding war for her services with the federal government’s Department of Information, with the ABC forced to find a position and a salary that would match what she had been offered by that department. Eventually the ABC created a new post for Broadhead, as presentation assistant (the first woman appointed to that position), and transferred her to the Head Office in Sydney. Her salary in 1941 was £336 per annum—more than double what she had earned when she left Australia less than two years before.

Within a few months, however, in August 1941, Broadhead was seconded to the Malayan Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) as a programme assistant with special responsibility for school broadcasts.\textsuperscript{97} Her salary was again doubled, to about £650 per annum. Broadhead’s BBC connections made her a valuable appointment for the MBC. The ABC was also keen to strengthen its own empire relationships through the involvement of its officers in broadcasting throughout the Commonwealth. The ABC wrote to the passport office in support of Broadhead, emphasizing that “Miss Broadhead’s services will be an important factor in the strengthening of British broadcasting in the East,” and that “the experience she will gain in Malaya will increase her usefulness to Australian and Empire broadcasting generally.”\textsuperscript{98}

The colonial-government-owned MBC had been established in 1940 with British educational broadcaster Eric Davis as chair (as well as director-general of broadcasting, Straits Settlements). On his arrival in December 1940, Davis declared the station “a unit in the radio network of the British Empire.”\textsuperscript{99}
FIGURE 3. Peggie Broadhead in Malaya, 1941–42. Courtesy the Robertson family.
Through her work at the MBC Broadhead witnessed the diversity of local, regional, and imperial identities in the British colony (fig. 3). The radio station was dominated by broadcasters from around the British Empire, including Australians, but Asians were also present in large numbers on-air and as technical staff. Broadhead worked closely with Eric Robertson, a Scot who had been employed as a forestry official with the Colonial Service before coming to the MBC in 1941 as producer of talks. While Broadhead mainly socialized with other Europeans, including British and Australian officers, visiting journalists and performing artists, and other broadcasters, she also mixed with a multitude of non-European peoples. She described some of these interactions in a letter written in the back of a recording van:

The Malay syce (driver) is driving. Sawhi is his name, and he is always grinning. He is a dear. Today we have the recording engineer, myself, and a Malay Fisheries Officer. We are all going down to record hauling songs of the Madrassi fishermen. It means getting the mike fixed up on the beach. It also means that I shall have to spend my time shooing away from the mike the innumerable small children, Chinese, Malaya, Indians who always congregate round.100

Broadhead found Malaya and its peoples intensely interesting, particularly during a trip to Gerik, near Perak, to record the “dream music” of the Temiar. Here she and the other MBC staff were observed by, as well as observers of, the Temiar; ethnographer Pat Noone told Broadhead that after their visit the Temiar would probably “make up a new dance all about us.”101 These intimate interactions with colonized peoples contrast with Howlett’s more limited encounters during her Cordelia trip, which consisted of either viewing colonized subjects from above or brief exchanges with people working in a service capacity. Broadhead was entranced and excited by this exotic yet comfortably familiar environment, telling her family: “Everything floods back—trees, and little feelings like feeling a breeze, or smelling a flower, or remembering the shape of a leaf which I had forgotten I had ever known.”102 As was the case with Howlett, overseas employment did not lessen Broadhead’s sentimental ties to Australia, at least in the early years of her absence.

As air raids increased, Broadhead’s position of white privilege was brought home to her. While sheltering in the basement of her apartment she wrote to her sister Sheila, “When you realise how closely people live together here in the Asiatic quarter, you realise that even a few bombs can inflict a
high mortality rate.” MBC staff, on the other hand, had been allocated “the best shelter in the island.” In February 1942 Singapore fell to the Japanese, and the staff were dispersed. Broadhead and Robertson, who had married in Malaya, made their way separately to India, where Broadhead worked in the foreign publications bureau in the British Ministry of Information in New Delhi.

Broadhead returned to the BBC after the war, initially as a talks producer in the North American Service. In 1956 she moved to BBC Television as a producer in Schools Broadcasting. As in the case of Howlett, Broadhead’s Australian background proved advantageous in her BBC career. In 1950, for example, she produced This Is Britain, a radio series specifically for Australian listeners, significant for being the first radio program broadcast simultaneously on both the ABC and the commercial Macquarie Broadcasting Network (which normally competed for audiences). The ABC’s general manager, Charles Moses, and Fred Daniell, executive director of the Macquarie Network, informed the BBC’s Australian representative, Patrick Jubb, that they considered the project of vital importance, and desired “to give the widest dissemination to a programme which would tell the Australian people what was really going on in Britain today.” Daniell’s assertion that it was “extremely important that the British point of view should find expression on the air” should be seen in the context of anxiety over the “Americanization” of popular culture, and over Australia’s political realignment with the United States since World War II. The radio medium, then, was still viewed as a powerful vehicle for strengthening ties between Australia and Britain, just as it was more than ten years earlier when Howlett broadcast from the Cordelia. Producing the program required an understanding of the stories and aspects of British life that would appeal to Australians. It featured segments on traditional British cultural pursuits and sport, and profiles of Australians who had successfully assimilated into England such as actor Peter Finch and cricketer Jock Livingston. Publicity material acknowledged Broadhead’s Australian background, but gave more prominence to her experience as an international broadcaster and traveler.

Broadhead’s transnational identity as a Dominions broadcaster accommodated both her Australian and her British connections, bestowing on her the authority to produce programs aimed at diasporic British audiences in Australasia. Although Broadhead apparently saw her national identity as more fluid than did Howlett, until her retirement in 1974 she continued to work on programs about Australia and its place in the Commonwealth.
Her son recalled that one trip home was facilitated by Broadhead pushing for an episode of the series *Living in the Commonwealth* to focus on Australia.\(^{107}\)

**OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN AT THE ABC AND BBC**

The interwar BBC offered women the chance to have a career that was not only satisfying, “but also ostensibly on equal terms with men,” writes Kate Murphy, although gender disparities in recruitment, pay, and promotion still existed. Women in the salaried ranks (as opposed to waged staff) experienced not only higher earnings but enhanced “mobility, advancement and autonomy.”\(^{108}\) By the early 1950s both Howlett and Broadhead were senior radio producers earning good salaries.\(^{109}\) Howlett became a senior salaried employee in 1939, with a starting salary of £310 per annum at a time when £250 was considered decent for a woman.\(^{110}\) Aside from their earning capacity, Howlett and Broadhead were working in areas in which women in Australian broadcasting struggled to make a mark. In 1947 both were working in Overseas Services, Howlett as the organizer of the prestigious current affairs program *Radio Newsreel*, and Broadhead as a talks producer in the North American Service.
Howlett’s BBC career in news and current affairs is particularly striking given that in Australia, women in radio rarely got the opportunity to step outside women’s and children’s programs. Ken Inglis notes that the only ABC program departments in which women reached positions of influence in the postwar period were those that catered to women and children.\textsuperscript{111} The first woman to lead a state department was Kay Kinane, who in 1944 became Western Australia’s supervisor of Schools Broadcasts.\textsuperscript{112} In ABC television female producers were few, even in the 1970s. By 1975 there were just two female heads of program departments, both looking after young people: Betty Parsons in Education and Kay Kinane in Young People’s. In the BBC between the wars, women were still well represented in children’s programming, but they also held salaried positions throughout Administration, Programmes, and Public Relations, including in areas that grew hostile to women after the war, such as News, Outside Broadcasts, and Light Entertainment.\textsuperscript{113} Three women became BBC directors in the interwar period: Hilda Matheson (director of Talks, 1927–32), Isa Benzie (foreign director, 1933–38), and Mary Somerville (director of Schools Broadcasting, 1931–47).

The BBC also offered women more equitable working conditions, including equal pay and the right to work after marriage and maternity. When Broadhead informed the ABC of her marriage to Eric Robertson, she was immediately transferred from the permanent to the temporary staff and lost her entitlement to superannuation (the pension plan). The prohibition on married women in the Australian Public Service did not end until 1966. The BBC’s marriage bar, which was not strictly enforced in the case of valued female staff, was dropped during the war and never reinstated.\textsuperscript{114} It would be wrong to say that gender discrimination did not exist at the BBC; Broadhead’s son recalled his mother’s fury that only male staff were eligible to apply for an internal home loan scheme. Into the 1950s, however, the BBC’s superior salaries and working conditions and greater range of positions available to women when compared with the ABC proved a draw for Australian women seeking to advance their careers in broadcasting.\textsuperscript{115} Australian Therese Denny, for example, moved to England in 1949 to pursue a career as a radio producer, and by the end of the 1950s was a successful producer and director for radio and television. In 1963 she was selected for an exchange program between the ABC and the BBC and returned to Australia to produce a series of documentaries for ABC Talks at a time when women were rarely given the opportunity to produce or direct general content.\textsuperscript{116} Like Howlett and Broadhead, Denny tactically engaged with the
institutional connections between the ABC and the BBC to benefit her transnational career.

CONCLUSION
This article has shown the ways that white women in broadcasting inscribed, and made real, the idea of imperial networks through their labor and mobility. By focusing on the connections between mobility, gender, and identity, it analyzed the self-identification of women broadcasters within a global framework, and illuminated the agency and adaptability of Australian women in different contexts. Muriel Howlett and Peggie Broadhead drew on their institutional and personal cross-border connections to advance their careers. Departing Australia for the metropole not only provided self-development opportunities, but permitted the formation of new professional and national identities, which were shaped in response to different contexts and interactions. Like other Commonwealth broadcasters working at the BBC, Howlett and Broadhead participated in the BBC’s mission to project British culture to English-speaking listeners overseas. Within this context of international communication and global labor, in which their experience outside Britain was foregrounded and valued, a new transnational identity of Dominions broadcaster emerged. Transnational journeys can also reveal underlying social inequalities. Broadhead and Howlett underscored their difference from the colonized peoples they encountered and highlighted their privileged position as white women.

The motivations for living “out of place” were complex and various, including opportunity, work, adventure, and love—reasons that are not always accessible to the researcher. Both women in this study had fulfilling, well-paid positions that would have been difficult to abandon. Howlett’s frequent expression of devotion to her parents and to her country of birth must be balanced against her dedication to her work in current affairs, an area of broadcasting in which not many women succeeded in Australia. For Broadhead, having a family in England (including a husband also working at the BBC) in addition to a rewarding job would have been factors in her decision to stay in Britain.

Howlett and Broadhead were undoubtedly recipients and conduits of knowledge about British programming and methods, but as this article has shown, they were also important contributors to British broadcasting. The BBC relied on, and profited by, their experience and understanding of Australia and the wider Commonwealth. An examination of Australian women’s labor in public service broadcasting in a global context illuminates the complicated connections...
between women’s status and aspirations, their mobility and career advancement, and their national and imperial identities.

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NOTES

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2. The British Empire comprised the Dominions, protectorates, colonies, and other territories brought under the sovereignty of the Crown of Great Britain and administered by the British government. The term “Commonwealth” dates from the first half of the twentieth century as former colonies became self-governing. The “British Commonwealth of Nations” was adopted officially at the 1926 Imperial Conference to designate the “autonomous communities within the British Empire,” and formalized through the Statute of Westminster in 1931. With the end of the empire after World War II, the free association of Britain and decolonized nations became known as the Commonwealth of Nations.


5. “The Task of the Overseas Services of the BBC” (draft), September 28, 1948, External Service Directorate meetings, BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading (hereafter BBC WAC), E2/610/1.

6. Recent examples include Alexander Badenoch and Gölo Follmer, eds., Transnationalizing Radio Research: New Approaches to an Old Medium (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript, 2018); Michele Hilmes, Network Nations: A Transnational History of British and American Broadcasting (New York and Oxon, UK: Routledge,


25. Letter from Broadhead to her mother, January 11, 1940, Robertson family archive.

26. Murphy, Behind the Wireless, 143.


28. Letter from Broadhead to her mother, February 18, 1940, Robertson family archive.


30. The Empire Service later became the General Overseas Service, and then part of External Services.


37. Howlett was not born “in the Australian outback,” as stated in some sources, but in Gunnedah, a fertile farming area of New South Wales. Leonard Miall, “Obituaries: Muriel


42. Edmonds, “Australia, Britain and the Empire Air Mail Scheme,” 94.


44. Memo from editor Home Service News to C(P), June 14, 1938, Howlett papers, National Library of Australia, MS 5029/7.


47. “Young N.S.W. Woman to Broadcast Trip,” *The Age* (Melbourne), June 27, 1938, 11.


56. Woollacott, “‘All This Is Empire, I Told Myself,’” 1006.


60. Interview with George Ivan Smith, April 22, 1992, BBC Oral History Collection, R43-72-1.
65. Woollacott, “All This Is Empire, I Told Myself,” 1007.
67. For example Mary Hill, who began working at the BBC in 1945, rarely alluded to her Australian upbringing in her correspondence, and public profiles of her usually mentioned only that she was educated at an exclusive Melbourne girls’ school.
73. Letter from Howlett to ONTE, September 15, 1945, BBC WAC, L1/1358/1.
74. Woollacott, To Try Her Fortune in London, 141.
76. “Brief History of the B.B.C. Empire Talks Department,” n.d.
77. Howlett to ONTE, September 15, 1945, BBC WAC, L1/1358.
82. Memo from Basil Kirke to Charles Moses, October 2, 1937, NAA Sydney, ST 482/1.
83. Memo from Robert C. McCall to the General Manager, March 15, 1939, NAA Sydney, ST 482/1.
84. Memo from Macgregor to Moses, June 30, 1939, NAA Sydney, ST 482/1.
85. Letter from Macgregor to Moses, June 30, 1939, NAA Sydney, ST 482/1.
86. Letter from Broadhead to Robert McCall, ABC manager for Victoria, NAA Sydney, ST.482/1.
87. Letter from Broadhead to family, January 31, 1940, Robertson family archive.
88. Letter from Broadhead to mother, May 24, 1940, Robertson family archive.
92. Letter from Broadhead to her mother, February 18, 1940, Robertson family archive.
94. Inglis, This Is the ABC, 167.
96. Memo from Molesworth to General Manager, August 22, 1940, NAA Sydney, ST.482/1.
98. A. L. Holman to the Collector of Customs, August 11, 1941, NAA Sydney, ST.482/1.
100. Letter from Broadhead to unknown recipient, December 7, 1941, Robertson family archive.
101. Letter from Broadhead to unknown recipient, December 7, 1941, Robertson family archive. The Temiar recordings and associated documents are now held in the Robertson: Senoi collection at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge.
102. Letter from Broadhead to May, September 25, 1941, Robertson family archive.
103. Letter from Broadhead to Sheila, January 20, 1941, Robertson family archive.
104. Memo from Patrick Jubb to George Looker, senior assistant, General Overseas Service, June 1, 1950, BBC WAC, E17/202/1.
106. Publicity material for This Is Britain, September 28, 1950, BBC WAC, E17/202/1.
108. Murphy, Behind the Wireless, 118, 119.
111. Inglis, This Is the ABC, 139.
113. Murphy, *Behind the Wireless*, 122.


115. In 1952, the disparity in salaries between the two organizations prompted Clement Semmler of the ABC’s Senior Officers Association to write to his BBC counterpart, Leslie Littlewood, the general secretary of the Staff Association, to inquire about the grounds for a recent 10 percent salary increase. Telegram from Semmler to Littlewood, March 5, 1952, “Staff Policy Comparisons with Other Organisations. Australian Broadcasting Commission 1933–1955,” BBC WAC, R49/81.